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**REIMAGINING THE CHAPLAIN CORPS
FOR THE FORCE OF THE FUTURE**

by

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Abstract

As Air Force (AF) leaders contemplate what will characterize the AF in the decades to come, Chaplain Corps (HC) leaders must do the same in order to remain relevant to the larger AF mission and best support Airmen. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that a dramatic increase in resources and manning to support the necessary changes will be available. In this challenging environment, one possible approach may be reimagine the HC and the way it goes about its business by right balancing its two core competencies found in Joint Publication 1-05, *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations*, of religious support and religious advisement. Regarding religious support, the transformation will including moving from HC members serving as the terminal end of ministry to managers of religious support. As for religious advisement, HC members will serve a more robust role as liaison both in the deployed and home station settings. Such a transformation will take time and will need to start at the recruitment stages. However, if these changes can be initiated, the reimagined HC will serve as a vibrant member of the future AF and best support the “Force of the Future.”

A respected first-century religious teacher once said, “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.”^{1,2} The proverb’s point seems to be, sometimes change requires more than an alteration; it demands a transformation. Reflecting on the age of aircraft fleets currently in the Air Force (AF) inventory and the need for modernization, Gen Mark A. Welsh III, AF chief of staff, remarked, “In 1991, it would’ve been ludicrous for us to talk...[about] using World War II’s venerable B-17 bomber to strike targets in Baghdad during the first Gulf War. But if we had used it, it would’ve been younger than the B-52, the KC-135, and the U-2 [we are using] today.”³ Unfortunately, this dichotomy of employing dated tools to address contemporary challenges exists within the AF Chaplain Corps (HC) as well. Though much has changed over the years--even among ministry models of civilian religious organizations⁴--for the most part, the HC has clung to paradigms that do not look much different than those from its inception. As AF leaders contemplate what will characterize the AF in the decades to come, HC leaders must do the same in order to remain relevant to the larger AF mission and best support Airmen. Fortunately, the starting point of the HC transformation may not be that far off. In fact, the key to transformation may rest in the revision of how we understand and implement the two fundamental HC competencies already found in joint doctrine: religious support and religious advisement.⁵

Initially, simply “revising” the understanding and implementation of the two fundamental joint doctrine competencies may not seem like a radical transformation. However, since the early days of HC’s existence, the preponderance of HC’s attention and functions have been focused on only one of those competencies: religious support (i.e., accommodating religious needs and providing pastoral care). Furthermore, religious advisement existed only in light of

the advisement of religious support. That is, chaplains advised commanders primarily on the religious, moral, and spiritual well being and resiliency of AF members, their families, and other authorized personnel.⁶ Considering the changes in contemporary religious environment and reduction in military personnel numbers, how the HC provides religious support will need to be reimagined. Additionally, examining the nature of warfare as it is today and how it may evolve in the future, the function of religious advisement will need to be redefined and invigorated. In his book, *Tomorrow's Air Force*, Jeffery Smith describes how the core culture of the AF transitioned from the bomber to the fighter community during the AF's first century. And, he suggests that the emerging future AF perspective may be what he calls "synergistic-operations."⁷ Though not a direct correlation, it may be said that during HC's first seven decades of existence, it also went through an evolution: from a parish-centric to a unit-centric ministry model [detailed further below]. As the HC moves forward to 2036, it too may embody a synergistic paradigm: a synergistic paradigm that rightly balances a reimagined religious support component with a redefined and invigorated religious advisement component.

AIR FORCE CHARACTERISTICS

To best understand how the HC can support the AF mission in the future, it is necessary first to review the characteristics of the AF as it is today and what it may look like in 2036. In their most recent AF posture statement, the Honorable Deborah Lee James, secretary of the Air Force, and General Welsh emphasized, "[Though our AF] remains the greatest air force on the planet....we are experiencing a colossal shift in the geopolitical landscape."⁸ For decades, the AF remained unchallenged in capability and capacity, enjoying unparalleled dominance of air and space.⁹ However, after several years of tight budgets, procurement rates of weapon systems have fallen dramatically, and correspondingly, its mostly uncontested advantage in air and

space.¹⁰ Exacerbating the situation, over the past 20 years, AF manning numbers have been reduced by 21% bringing it to its lowest levels since its inception.¹¹ Unfortunately, as procurement rates and personnel numbers have fallen, the demands for combat operations have not. Even after 25 consecutive years of combat, the AF continues to be heavily engaged with military challenges caused by Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs), Russia, China, North Korea, and various hotspots in the CENTCOM AOR.¹² Additionally, while juggling these challenges, the AF has also had to remain vigilant properly maintaining its critically important core nuclear capability to safeguard its ability to provide a “safe, secure, and reliable nuclear deterrent” for our nation and our allies.¹³

Yet, despite these and other challenges, the AF has valiantly fulfilled its role by working together with its joint and coalition partners to provide “around-the-clock Global Vigilance, Global Reach, and Global Power in defense of our Nation and our Allies.”¹⁴ Furthermore, while extending the lifespan and capabilities of its decades old weapons systems through a patchwork of upgrades, the AF has also innovated, dramatically increasing its Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) enterprise as well as its cyberspace and Special Operations functions. Certainly, an area of growth over the past decade has been the remotely piloted weapon systems. The ability to loiter, monitor, track, and even engage targets over extended period of time have significantly increased the options of our Joint Forces Commanders (JFCs). And, the expansion of these unmanned technologies--including autonomous weapon systems--is expected to increase in the years to come, especially since unmanned technologies provide a much more cost effective alternative to traditional manned aircrafts.¹⁵ There is, of course, a downside to these unmanned technologies. They rely heavily on air and space dominance, and in the future, the AF may not be able to guarantee it.

Now, exactly what challenges the AF will face in the future cannot be predicted with absolute certainty. But, a reasonable forecast can be hypothesized based on current trends and established assumptions. In the chapter entitled, “Predicting the Future,” Smith lists nine broad assumptions about the future as well as 14 known future requirements.¹⁶ However, what is notable about his argument is his suggestion that the AF of the future will not have a single system-based perspective (i.e., bomber or fighter-centric) but a synergistic one (as he labels it: “combined arms”).¹⁷ In other words, the focus of the future AF will not be on the “means” (i.e., a capability) but the “ends” (i.e., meeting the JFC’s intent via a network of capabilities).¹⁸ Focusing on the “ends” will be necessary because potential adversaries of the future will most likely be non-state or transnational actors who will not have a fielded force and will be motivated by value systems, ideologies, and theologies that are difficult to deter.¹⁹ Combatting such VEOs will require more than weapons systems engaged in force-on-force battles. It will necessitate a network of capabilities navigating through a complex, irregular battlespace employing both kinetic weapon systems and non-kinetic engagements requiring a thorough understanding of culture, religion, and diplomacy.²⁰

Strategic planner, Thomas Barnett, argues that the military of the future should be comprised of two related but separate forces: Leviathan and SysAdmin (System Administrators) forces.²¹ Whereas the Leviathan force will conduct traditional military operations to bring order (i.e., “kill people and break things”), the SysAdmin force will conduct post-conflict operations to “wage peace” through actions such as stabilization and reconstruction operations, humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR), and counterinsurgency operations (COIN). Though, ultimately, Barnett envisions the SysAdmin force as a separate entity, its early iterations will have its roots in the military.²² However, to achieve this vision, a cadre of mature, capable, and

trained specialists will need to be developed. Last year, in a speech at George Washington University, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter revealed several initiatives that he is pushing to build a “Force of the Future.”²³ These initiatives--though not directly associated with Barnett’s SysAdmin force--would develop such a cadre. For example, the initiatives include opportunities for military members to take part in internships and fellowships at civilian companies, organizations, and educational institutions as well as opportunities for civilian subject matter experts to serve in the military for short periods of time to share their expertise and knowledge. The bottom line is, to dominate the complex challenges of the future, the AF of 2036 will need to be characterized by synergistic network of capabilities that is led by educated and trained military members who continually collaborate symbiotically with their civilians counterparts.

CHAPLAIN CORPS CHARACTERISTICS

To meet the religious needs of these future Airmen and support the AF mission, the HC will need to reimagine its ministry model and the role of its chaplains as religious staff officers. Historically, the parish-centric ministry model has been the predominant HC paradigm. The focus of the HC has been to provide a wide range of worship opportunities, provide religious education, and offer spiritual counseling. Most of these activities occurred within the chapel building and were geared toward those who regularly attended chapel services. However, in recent years, a greater emphasis has been placed on unit ministry.²⁴ Key activities of unit ministry include visiting Airmen in their workplaces, responding to crisis, offering spiritual fitness programs and training, and marriage enhancement retreats as well as maintaining Airmen ministry or resiliency centers. Though some may argue that these are two very distinct ministry models, the reality is, they are both elements of religious support. The HC is very good at these things and should continue to do them. Like the nuclear enterprise of the AF, religious support is

a “bread and butter” function. Nonetheless, how the HC provides religious support in the future will need to be reevaluated in light of current and future realities.

Like the AF, over the past 20 years, HC personnel numbers have fallen approximately 21%: from 613 chaplains on active duty in 1996 to 485 chaplains in 2016.²⁵ Though similar in percentage, due to the small size of the career field, the drawdown resulted in multiple bases with unfilled positions. Furthermore, the 2016 number above includes 20 reserve chaplains who were brought on active duty for one, limited three year tour to cover shortfalls. With personnel numbers unlikely to increase in the years to come and deployments and mission requirements unlikely to decrease, a reimagining of how religious support is delivered is necessary. One approach may be to redefine the role of chaplains and chaplain assistants (HC staff) as managers of religious support rather than as the terminal end of ministry. Though staff sizes and mission vary from base to base, the general expectation is that only HC staff can execute the full complement of religious support activities. Therefore, HC members are worn out planning and leading worship and education programs, running marriage retreats and Airmen Centers, as well as visiting every unit on base at least once a month and responding to crisis calls around the clock. Rather than functioning as the terminal end of ministry--the only ones who can execute religious support--outside of religious rites and sacraments, they should oversee religious support as managers. Responsibilities should be delegated to contract and volunteer personnel and the overall litany of activities at the chapel should be reduced by networking with local, off-base religious organizations to leverage their programs. Again, this does not mean that HC staff will totally divest itself of providing religious support. However, it does imply that the chapel will serve more as the hub or conduit of religious support rather than its sole source.²⁶ Like the base medical facility, the size, needs, and mission of the base will determine the extent of religious

support HC will provide. But, as managers of religious support, HC staff will invest more effort to networking and referral services.

As managers of religious support, HC members will then be free to invigorate their role as religious staff officers and provide commanders with robust religious advisement. For some HC members, the term “religious staff officer” does not sound consistent with why they joined the HC. They became HC staff to provide religious support, not advisement. However, in light of future AF mission requirements, religious advisement may be a more effective way to support Airmen and the AF mission. As stated above, the nature of warfare in the future will be complex and irregular. Force-on-force combat is unlikely, and clear lines dividing combatants and noncombatants will not exist. To achieve their “ends,” JFCs will need to implement a full array of options including affecting centers of gravity in a non-violent manner and building relationships with local communities. In such environments, HC can provide multiple avenues of advisement without sacrificing their role as noncombatants. Among those avenues are religious leader engagement (RLE), religious area assessment, and ethical advisement.

According to Miroslav Volf, professor at Yale University Divinity School, due to their unique training and position, chaplains have the potential to serve as powerful bridge builders and agents of reconciliation.²⁷ The truth is, they have been doing just that over the last decade and a half in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom as well as in military operations before and after. More and more chaplains are publishing papers and memoirs recounting their stories of relationships built, reconciliation made, human dignity restored, and suffering reduced.²⁸ Interestingly, even the State Department recognizes the important role of religion in international affairs and have established the Office of Religion and Global Affairs.²⁹ Critics worry that HC participation in RLE will put chaplains in danger of losing their noncombatant

status. However, the role of the chaplain in such operations is not to gather intelligence on the enemy but to build relationships with community members. Precautions will need to be taken, but with proper training, it can be done. And, the benefit is, if relationships can be established and seeds of reconciliation planted, potential conditions of future peace will be paved.³⁰

Other critics argue that religions, by their very nature, are violent.³¹ Certainly, many have abused religion to justify or spread violence. However, this is another reason why the HC would be best equipped to work in pluralistic environments. Though HC members may not be experts of every religion, due to their training, they are both more sensitive to the nuances of faith as well as skilled at working with people of other faiths. In fact, because HC members are more adept at working in pluralistic situations, they may actually be more accommodating to working with someone of another faith than non-HC members who hold a private faith or no faith. This sensitivity also allows HC members to assemble a fuller religious area assessment. Rather than mere facts about a religion, HC members can provide insights for the JFC about how a particular faith actually plays out in real life and what second or third order effects of a particular action may create. In fact, the perspective that the HC offers may be consistent with the kind of advisement a member of Barnett's SysAdmin force would provide.

Finally, as religious staff officers, there is an inherent "otherness" about HC members, especially chaplains. Chaplains are noncombatants. They also wear "two hats" as military officers and ordained clergy--those set apart for a sacred duty. Their role as religious leaders obliges them to reflect on more abstract, existential ideas and ethics as well as advocate for justice and human dignity. As the nature of warfare moves more and more toward unmanned and automated weapon systems, an "outside" voice that speaks to human dignity and principles of right and wrong who "has a seat at the table" may not be a bad thing to have around. In the

end, it is the JFC's decision, but bold, authentic religious advisement may provide him or her the kind of perspective that will provide a better "end."

CHAPLAIN CORPS WAY AHEAD

As noted above, there are HC members--especially chaplains--who did not join the HC to be managers of religious support and serve as religious staff officers. However, if the HC is to proceed down this direction based on the projected vision of the AF of 2036, then decisions and actions must be taken now to get the HC from where it is now to where it needs to be in the future. The first step then must be to establish training for religious support and religious advisement in line with the suggestions above at the Air Force Chaplain Corps College. Elements of this transformed ministry model ought to be incorporated into all levels of core functional training as well as stand alone course. Not only internally, but also externally through educational opportunities at civilian institutions (e.g., AFIT-C slots) where highly capable HC members can be developed. Furthermore, in line with Secretary Carter's "Force of the Future" initiatives, internships with NGOs closely related to the responsibilities of religious advisement should be initiated as well as exchange programs with sister and foreign military services to stimulate knowledge and experience that cannot be gained otherwise.

Finally, in addition to education and training, focus on recruiting religious leaders who are inclined to function in this new HC role will need to be instituted. Currently, chaplain recruiting is done in a passive manner where recruiters wait for civilian ecclesiastical endorsers to send applicants to them. Due to the extensive list of application requirements,³² it would be more advantageous to seek applicants out actively. For instance, one way would be to meet with prospective applicants while they are still in their theological studies to encourage them to specialize in areas like world religions or ethics. Furthermore, prospective chaplain applicants

can then gear their years of leadership experience in ministries where they would be able to work in a pluralistic environment as well as develop advisement skills. As stated above, personnel manning numbers are unlikely to increase. In the future, each member of the HC must be able to carry out the dual competencies of religious support and religious advisement effectively in order for the mission of the HC and the AF to succeed.

CONCLUSION

For nearly seven decades, the HC has served Airmen, their families, and the mission of the AF with dedicated religious support. In their service to God and country, nine chaplains received the Medal of Honor while many more cared for and prayed with service members without much recognition.³³ Until recently, the nature of warfare accommodated an environment where HC members could focus primarily on religious support. However, in the decades to come, the nature of warfare will demand a transformed approach to the HC paradigm. Though religious support will still be necessary, rather than serving as the terminal end of ministry, HC members will need to reimagine their role as managers of religious support. By reducing, delegating, and networking out some of their religious support duties, HC members can then focus on training and serving as religious staff officers to provide robust religious advisement to their commanders. As those uniquely trained in religion, HC members will be able to serve their commanders as agents of RLE, subject matter experts in religious area assessment, and a bold voice of ethical reasoning. This transformation will take time and it will require changes to HC training, education, and recruiting. But, in the end, this transformation of reimagining religious support and invigorating and rebalancing religious advisement will position the HC to better serve our Airmen and the mission of the AF in 2036.

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Endnotes:

¹ I wish to thank Majors Joseph Barnum and Matthew Boyd for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. All errors found herein are my own.

² Mark 2:21 (English Standard Version). The short illustration quoted above is attributed to Jesus and is located in the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament of the Christian Holy Bible.

³ Amaani Lyle, “Welsh: Sequestration Harms Aging, Shrinking Air Force,” *DoD News, Defense Media Activity*, 27 February 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/604194/welsh-sequestration-harms-aging-shrinking-air-force>.

⁴ Prior to attending Air Command and Staff College, I served as Deputy Chief, Chaplain Accessions, Headquarters Air Force Recruiting Service. An essential eligibility criterion of a chaplain applicant is a minimum of two years of religious leadership experience (IAW AFRSI 36-2001, para. 8.4.1.2, 1 Aug 2012). A growing challenge our office faced was the rise of “non-traditional” religious leadership experience submitted by the applicants (e.g., a pastor of a church is a traditional experience whereas a staff missionary of a parachurch apartment ministry is a non-traditional experience).

⁵ Joint Publication (JP) 1-05, *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations*, 20 November 2013, viii.

⁶ Ibid, vii.

⁷ Jeffery J. Smith, *Tomorrow's Air Force: Tracing the Past, Shaping the Future* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 210.

⁸ Hon. Deborah Lee James and Gen Mark A. Welsh III, “Fiscal Year 2017 Air Force Posture Statement” (address, United States Senate, 10 February 2016), 1.

⁹ Ibid, 4.

¹⁰ Ibid, 3.

¹¹ Hon. Deborah Lee James and Gen Mark A. Welsh III, “Fiscal Year 2015 Air Force Posture Statement” (address, United States Senate, 14 March 2014), 3. Also, the Air Force Historical Support Division (AFHSD) maintains end strength numbers on its website. According to the website, the AF end strength in 1996 was 389,001 and in 2016, it is 307,001. <http://www.afhso.af.mil/usafstatistics/index.asp>.

¹² FY2017 AF Posture Statement, 2.

¹³ Ibid, 2.

¹⁴ Ibid, 1.

¹⁵ Smith, 205.

¹⁶ Ibid, 203-205.

¹⁷ Ibid, 207.

¹⁸ Ibid, 209.

¹⁹ Joint Futures Group (J59), United States Joint Forces Command, *The Joint Operating Environment (JOE) 2010*, staff study, 18 February 2010, 64.

²⁰ Ibid, 67.

²¹ Thomas Barnett, “Let’s Rethink America’s Military Strategy,” filmed February 2005, TED video, 23:43, https://www.ted.com/talks/thomas_barnett_draws_a_new_map_for_peace?language=en#t-1367454.

²² Ibid.

²³ Hon. Ashton Carter, secretary of defense (speech, George Washington University, Washington, DC, 18 November 2015).

²⁴ As there were fighters while the bomber community dominated (see Smith), both unit ministry and parish ministry existed simultaneously. However, since I have been in the AF, a greater emphasis has been placed on unit ministry. An example of this is the WIG (“wildly important goal”) initiative kicked off in 2013 that encouraged HC staff to spend up to 60% of their work week in unit ministry.

²⁵ Interactive Demographic Analysis System, Air Force Personnel Center, http://access.afpc.af.mil/vbinDMZ/broker.exe?_program=ideaspub.IDEAS_Step1.sas&_service=pZ1pub1&_debug=0.

²⁶ Years ago, HC used three phrases to describe their strategic priorities: Chapel-Based Ministries, Warrior Care, & Care for the Caregiver. These priorities can serve as a template for the Manager of Religious Support concept. That is, if HC staff trained chapel attendees through Chapel-Based Ministries to serve as co-caregivers, these co-caregivers would be force multipliers of Warrior Care in the units. By sharing the load, HC staff would be freed up to serve as crisis responders (like a QRF--quick reaction force--for emergencies). Additionally, by networking with off-base churches and helping agencies, HC will create a more collaborative and organized community environment enhancing the flow of support, especially in times of crisis. By maintaining these relationships, HC staff would be in a better position to advise the commander of trustworthy organizations and bolster community relations.

²⁷ Miroslav Volf, “Agents of Peace in Theaters of War: Re-Thinking the Role of Military Chaplains,” Yale Center for Faith & Culture, Yale University, 6, <http://faith.yale.edu/reconciliation-project/resources>.

²⁸ For the Tribes & Traditional Cultures elective class (ACSC AY16, Term 2), I wrote a paper for my final that recounts several RLE encounters including a story from Ch, Brig Gen Steven Schaick, Air Force Deputy Chief of Chaplains. In his story, Ch Schaick retells of an opportunity he had to accompany a Civil Affairs team during Operation Northern Watch. His mere presence (as the team’s “holy man”) made a positive impact on the Civil Affairs team’s mission.

²⁹ Office of Religion and Global Affairs, United States Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/s/rga/>.

³⁰ Volf, 18.

³¹ Ibid, 7.

³² Air Force Recruiting Service Instructions (AFRSI) 36-2001, *Recruiting Procedures for the Air Force*, 1 August 2012, Chapter 8: Air Force Chaplain Corps.

³³ Since this paper is primarily about the Air Force Chaplain Corps, for clarification, I would like to note that none of the Medal of Honor recipients mentioned here were Air Force chaplains.